

Making collaboration work in education markets: FE and HE transitions and 'tertiary' systems in Scotland and England

Josh Patel

Edge Foundation, London, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Technical, Professional and Vocational Higher Education (TPV)

Abstract

There has been growing interest in 'tertiary' systems to encourage greater collaboration in HE and FE across the four nations of the UK. Advocates promise opportunities for flexibility for students, and responsiveness to regional economic needs through holistic coordination of the whole system. This research asked what motivates institutions to collaborate in existing systems, and whether students' experiences change. It focused on formal tertiary 'progression pathways' for students to transition between partnered FE and HE institutions. It found, ironically, these collaborations were often pursued because of, and as part of, the competitive market. Widening participation agendas are pursued in close association for cultivating student demand. Students' experiences and outcomes in tertiary pathways are to some extent distinctive, and facilitate improved access to shared resources, though formal evidence is not yet widely collected. Accounts of opportunities from and barriers to collaboration can inform how to facilitate purposeful collaboration in the future.

Full paper

Responding to prevailing competitive, homogenising market governance regimes (Frank, Gower, and Naef, 2019), policy discourse has advanced the possibility of a more rational, collaborative, 'joined-up system' (Augar, 2019) of tertiary education in the UK. 'Tertiary' is now explicitly associated with 'unitary' governance and oversight of post-16 education (Hazelkorn, 2016; 2023), including higher education (HE) and further education (FE) to facilitate coordination, specialisation, greater responsiveness to regional socioeconomic needs (Shattock and Horvath, 2023), widening participation, and credit transferability. The new unified regulatory and funding system, Medr, in Wales is the most ambitious, followed by Scotland, where 20% of HE is delivered through articulation agreements with FE, and Northern Ireland has pioneered new forums for coordination between FE and HE (Laczik and Patel, 2023). In England, outside of specific novel integrated partnerships and initiatives like Institutes of Technology, educational market policies remain ascendent. However, the instigation of Skills England (2024) and implementation of the Lifelong

Learning Entitlement (LLE) from 2026, uniting the loans system across FE and HE, has precipitated a sense that a tertiary system may emerge in England too.

Most debate around tertiary systems has prioritised political discussion as to the mechanisms and scope. Evidence as to how far collaboration in existing systems change institutions' strategic capacities and learner outcomes remains underexamined. Existing literature has indicated that tertiary collaboration is a response to improve the rationalisation of resources. International evidence has warned that rationalisation may erode colleges' localism, and there is doubt as to how far collaborative actually contributes to widening participation (Wheelahan, 2009). Prescriptive unitary funding and quality regimes and domineering university interests might restrict educational innovation. Knowledge of student outcomes afforded by tertiary collaboration is limited (Bathmaker, 2016; Lavender, 2020). Understanding the nature of existing collaboration is an important consideration as to how reform to tertiary systems can meaningfully enhance institutional effectiveness and student outcomes.

This paper looks at one element of tertiary collaboration: formal 'progression pathways' or transitions between partnered FE and HE institutions across Scotland and England. It asked, firstly, are these partnerships perceived as enabling distinctive opportunities for students that would otherwise not exist? What sort of students are recruited, how are their experiences described, and what sort of outcomes do they achieve? Secondly, the research sought to investigate institutions' motivations for establishing existing tertiary pathways. It considered the role of institutional cultures and external factor including policy contexts. To answer these questions, it draws on analysis of 17 anonymised qualitative interviews with students and professionals and documentary analysis of publicly available information.

First, the findings suggests that while the diffusion of collaboration is much greater in Scotland than England, in both the pressures of market conditions and competition for diminishing national resources were an important prerequisite and justification for fostering collaboration. Widening participation to higher education was a key motivation for both colleges and universities for establishing partnerships, but this was not antagonistic to, for example, universities participating to 'grow-your-own' student demand. Colleges similarly, could turn competition to their advantage: as one described, 'I will say [...] Your numbers are dropping. Let us help you fill those spaces'. Such partnerships could facilitate division of labour partners to avoid mutually detrimental competition. This necessitated establishing shared cultures and mutual trust to ensure, as one interviewee described, that college partners didn't 'see the [university] as coming in and taking their chips'. However, the likely continuing deterioration of the economic situation and the introduction of the LLE was seen threatening partnerships as universities looked for new markets to diversify their income streams.

Secondly, this research found cautious agreement that student outcomes and achievement afforded by tertiary collaborations were distinctive. Partnerships did facilitate opportunities to students that may not have been available before in terms of access and shared

facilities. But there is a paucity of formal data that can helpfully distinguish students on tertiary pathways versus mainstream undergraduate students. Interviewees reported improved retention and good assessment outcomes for students with experience of colleges in HE than those without, in part due to additional supplementary provision pathways often provided. Interviewees stressed the importance of shared institutional cultures and priorities to afford support; this particularly included data sharing agreements.

These findings suggest while market competition has catalysed some collaboration, the trust required to sustain these collaborations is fragile and contingent. Evidence of impact on student outcomes remains underdeveloped. The research raises questions as to the purpose of FE-HE collaboration and how policy can best facilitate purposeful collaboration.